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L.A. police, sheriff turn down CIA request

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LOS ANGELES

The CIA contacted the Los Angeles Police Department and the county Sheriff's Department looking for officers to battle terrorism overseas, but both local agencies denied the request, officials said Monday.

The CIA called 18 civilian police agencies to a July 21 intelligence briefing at its headquarters near Washington, but the only sheriff's department represented was from Los Angeles County, Sheriff Sherman Block said.

Both the LAPD and the Sheriff's Department said they had rebuffed the Central Intelligence Agency's attempt to recruit officers because they didn't want to lose their best men.

"As far as I know, we were the only sheriff's department contacted," Block said in a telephone interview.

The CIA would not say what agencies were contacted and would not confirm that Los Angeles County was the only sheriff's department contacted.

Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates refused comment on the CIA drive, but spokesman Lt. Dan Cooke said, "We are trying to maintain our own people here."

"It is difficult to find qualified people and when we do, we don't want to lose them," Cooke said, adding that a decision was made not to inform rank-and-file officers about the CIA offer.

Block said the CIA was offering three-year contracts and no guarantee of being hired as permanent CIA employees.

"The kind of people they would like to have we want to keep," Block said, adding that like the LAPD, the Sheriff's Department did not inform officers of the CIA offer.

A few weeks after the Washington meeting a CIA representative came to Los Angeles "to pitch the program," Block said. "But there was no hard sell.

"If an individual left the force, he would lose his benefits. Under our procedures, it is just impossible for an active member to get a leave of absence for three years," Block said.

"The CIA felt that if they could recruit experienced officers, it would give them a leg up, and I can't blame them," said Block, a 30-year-veteran of the Sheriff's Department.

"Most police forces would rather hire laterally (from other forces) than hire new recruits." Although it was reported the CIA was interested in hiring retirees, Block said when he discussed it with representatives "they just weren't interested in retirees."

The 62-year-old sheriff said he thought the anti-terrorist training his men got prior to the 1984 Summer Olympics was adequate, and that his officers don't need to go overseas for more.

"Our anti-terrorist training programs were accelerated before the Olympics and we're still very active and involved in training programs," he said.

Any officer leaving the force to work for the CIA would have to reapply, but having worked with the CIA would not pose a problem for a prospective hiree, Block said.

STAT "The experience of working covertly would not be a negative," he said.

CIA spokeswoman Sharon Foster said the CIA needs officers with investigative skills and that although they were not being recruited specifically to counter terrorism, "there has never been terrorism on as great a scale as it is now."

It was unclear how many officers the CIA needs, or from what cities they were being recruited, but The New York Times reported Monday the agency contacted the police departments of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Houston, Boston and San Francisco.